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Who has agency to really interpret those?

I don't feel comfortable navigating those territories; I'm not a political playwright, so when I entered the room with the cast, I told them we need to think from the start about these big myths around homelessness. We brought people in to talk to us about these myths and we needed to shape these characters to encapsulate these myths and debunk them at the same time.

The characters are abstractions that represent mental illness, dementia, drug addiction, abuse and isolation and yet they each have their own story to debunk that myth.

No, the drug addict was not always a drug addict. It isn't that he doesn't want a way out. There is an invitation to hear these fictionalized stories that are based on, not reality, but on huge misconceptions that we (housed people) have.

I urged my actors to separate their mind from representing a "real" character, per se. This is very hard for actors, they want to play the honesty. But once I got them past the idea of each of them as a real character and we went into the "Tim Burton Land" (chuckles) as far as, like, exaggeration. There is an amplification through the simplification that happens. Once you amplify it, the message becomes very simple.

S.Z.: *There was definitely an ethereal feeling to the play. It is reminiscent, as I understand it, of El Día de los Muertos, where this "veil" is lifted and for a few hours, the living and the dead can, metaphorically, see through from one side of life or death to the other. Will you talk a bit about the visual imagery in the play of the skeletons La Catrina and El Catrin?*

G.E.: In knowing that the expectation of the audiences here is that you are going to go to a Day of the Dead show, you have to see "la muerta." You have to be able to recognize theatrically that death is present.

I didn't want to put all of the olvidados in typical calavera (skull) makeup because I felt that would take away from these abstractions that I was trying to achieve.

In looking at all of the iconography and growing up in Mexico, La Catrina/El Catrin have a very specific political creation. They were created specifically by (José Guadalupe) Posada to mock the class system. To basically say to the rich: "You are going to die as well. Yes, right now, you may be wearing these beautiful silks and you think they are worth something, but you will take those to your death same as the beggar on the street."

It was important for me to give that a nod and say, "I see you. You are not just a beautiful, hatted icon. I know who you are and why you are here." That is why, with the character of La Catrina, or Anastasia, I was very specific with (that actress) about being this woman who suffers from denial and dementia that the whole time she thinks that she is rich and that she doesn't belong there and that her family is coming to pick her up.

To make her then embody La Catrina and to transform El Vagabundo, the Tramp, into El Catrin was a nod to Posada. This is my version of Posada's print in 2016 in Portland, Oregon.

S.Z.: *I've heard you speak about your connection to the Latina/o Theater Commons, or LTC, a movement that takes a commons-based approach toward American theater. There aren't many women directors in theater in general, and even fewer Latina directors, can you speak to your experience as either or both?*

G.E.: I don't consider myself a director. I am new in that way. I do devise theater, which is quite different in that it's a strong writer-in-the-room directing a body of actors towards the enacting of a script.

I don't have any experience in directing a

play that is not mine. I think that requires a very different set of skills.

Yes, there are not a lot of Latina directors, just from what I know as being a part of the LTC. We have some really strong (Latina directors) like Lisa Portes. She was just awarded the 2016 Zelda Fichandler Award which recognizes an outstanding director. She is the head of the directing school at DePaul University.

I jumped into directing because I was like, "If I want to see my own work done, then I have to do it." I think that attitude is kind of common. So you see more of this hybrid popping up in the Latina theatrical community, especially now.

S.Z.: *Why now?*

G.E.: At least coming from New York, the director role is disappearing a bit. Or at least it is allowing itself to breathe, morph in a different way. It's one of the oldest roles

that have been untouched by current trends in the form and the necessity – the need of the audience. The true form of directorship is shifting, which is really exciting.

If it would have stayed at the white straight male level, than we would never get anything new.

S.Z.: *Previous to writing and directing El Muerto Vagabundo, what was your experience with homelessness?*

G.E.: Really just what I see in New York City. In the other cities I have lived in, it wasn't that apparent. Of course, it was there, but I don't recall ever really coming face-to-face with homelessness until New York. Homelessness is abundant there.

My very first experience was when I was in San Diego, I had my first job and there was a man across the street who would sit

and have lunch and he had his bike and all of his stuff. He was obviously homeless, but he looked like Santa Claus – a jolly, chubby male with a big, white beard and I didn't understand. Did he choose this? Is he crazy?

So I decided to sit down with him and have lunch with him and hear his stories. After that, I was like: Oh, it's people. Everybody has a different story.

You talk to the homeless in New York and the only thing they are thinking about is, "I can't fall asleep because I am going to be robbed." The homeless in NYC are not as tribal as you see here in Portland where people (on the street) will protect each other a bit more.

In New York it is not like that. People are really sleep deprived and have gone nuts. They don't want to go to sleep because they will get robbed by other homeless.

So there is this level of stress, and you start to see that "craziness" show up and you realize that it is stress. It has nothing to do with drug use, this is a tremendous amount of stress that just makes the brain shut off.

My experience with people experiencing homelessness is not being afraid to start conversations. We, as a society, hold this fear of the homeless. I want to know how to help.

S.Z.: *Was there a takeaway from the experience of creating and putting on this production that stands out to you most?*

G.E.: The rehearsal room can be a sanctuary for many. We did have two actors who have had direct experience with homelessness, one of them just recently. One actor was sent to audition from a homeless shelter. And then there he was in our cast and at our theater. And that was sanctuary. That was the place that led him to gather himself and get a job and find a place to stay.

I think the theater, maybe like the streets, brings people together that would have not otherwise crossed paths and it put us in a very vulnerable position. I think we (the cast and crew of "El Muerto Vagabundo") will all remain friends and that is really powerful.